

White House Conf on Aging 1/9/61

A First for Aging

Three years ago yesterday, on January 8, 1958, I introduced the legislation that prepared the way for today's meeting.

Because action was so urgently needed, my original bill called for a conference to be held within the year. During the hearings it became evident that more time would be needed for studies, grass roots participation and demonstration projects. For this reason the conference date was changed. However, it was always emphasized that the interim period would see new programs initiated and old ones strengthened or expanded. It was not intended to be a "wait-see" period until the conference recommendations were published.

The year 1960 has been called the gerontological year. Never before have so many meetings, studies and reports been made on aging. Some have said that these pre-Conference activities alone have justified the effort and expense of the White House Conference.

In a large measure this is true. Individuals and communities as well as states and national organizations that were passively interested or not involved have become responsive and responsible for important programs in aging. There has been a certain magic in the phrase "for White House Conference on Aging," and people from coast to coast reflected a renewed faith "that this time we can expect action."

We would be naive if we were not aware of some of the problems that have confronted you in your preparation for this meeting - some of them are still very much with us here as you move into your chosen sections and work groups.

Pressures have been exerted that were never a part of previous political activities. Professional and special interest groups have spent thousands of dollars to defend or defeat ideologies which have tremendous potentials for older persons. Significant legislation has also been introduced in the last session of Congress which will become a part of your deliberations.

I too, have introduced a bill which I believe necessary to give emphasis to your recommendations and to give strength and continuity to a national program through a Federal Commission on Aging.

Many of your state reports and studies have come to my attention. I ~~too~~ have been receiving my daily supply of papers, programs and documents that you as delegates have been receiving in preparation for your attendance. Together with the pamphlets and handouts you will accumulate here, you will all qualify as the best potential experts in the field of aging in your community or organization.

As I review the materials from the states I am struck with the similarity of their findings and recommendations. It is true that many states have moved ahead with their programs, but basically the needs, the desires and goals are the same. This is not surprising. Some have questioned the need for individual state studies when the findings would only confirm what we already knew.

The answer to this criticism is obvious to most of you. It was the actual involvement of people at all levels studying and analyzing the specific data for their state that awakened interest and developed a sense of personal concern and responsibility.

I have been critical, however, that so little action has preceded this meeting. I make the distinction between action and activity. Activity we have - action to implement the findings is in too many places waiting the results of your deliberations here. This is true even where it is known that the program is community oriented and its residents are the best qualified to evaluate and proceed.

There are, of course, outstanding exceptions that deserve high praise. Rather than offend by oversight, I would like to complement especially those states that added to the grant made available by the Conference Act. Several states contributed amounts equal to or exceeding the Federal grant to support further research, expanded programs, establish permanent commissions and are paying the expenses of their delegates.

Many communities also contributed from their own funds toward positive programs that will be prepared to incorporate the conference recommendations into their well established projects.

Several states amended their hiring and retirement regulations to remove the age barriers. Practically every report indicated a more hopeful employment picture for the aging.

I am pleased that this conference is also responsible for the model home exhibit that has literally been brought or constructed here in Washington for your critical evaluation and comments. This is much like bringing the mountain to Mohammed. I hope you will take advantage of the opportunity as I did on Friday to see how private industry and public cooperation can work together to achieve something that would be difficult or impossible to create alone.

There are other aspects of this conference that are disturbing but which must be overcome by your dedication as a delegate to achieve the very best solution to the problems discussed in your sections. You alone may determine how effectively the action is

communicated to your state, community or organization.

In my original bill and the remarks introducing it, I insisted that this conference in all of its phases should remain bi-partisan or nonpartisan. The problems with which the aging are confronted are not respectors of race, color, creed or political parties. We are assembled to consider the recommendations made in your state and local meetings and organizational conferences. We must be influenced only by what we regard as the highest standard that our economy can support, what we are willing to finance and always what is in the best national interest.

It is not for me to say how or what should be done, but I do not think we will have fulfilled our assigned responsibilities unless we develop specific recommendations that will answer the stated purposes of the conference. These include action to:

- (1) Eliminate age discrimination in employment, making it possible for individuals who are willing and able to obtain employment in capacities which are not menial or insulting to their abilities.

- (2) Provide adequate retirement income with safeguards to protect the dollar value against inflation. "Subsistence living" is not enough to maintain or restore the independence of the elderly.
- (3) Furnish health and medical care in such a way that personal pride and dignity will not be offended; making it possible for individuals to pay to the extent they are able within fixed incomes.
- (4) Make suitable housing and living accommodations available at prices they can afford.
- (5) Accelerate research into every one of the threats of illness, or disablement that plague the later years.
- (6) Make the gift of added years meaningful by creating opportunities for service and useful activity.

Our efforts are spurred on through the correspondence we receive. Let me share part of a letter:

"Of course it is splended to smooth our path. We must have a crust of bread and a shelter for our bodies. But

what is necessary also is the element of reasonable hope for a better tomorrow as regards the handicaps of body and mind which have accumulated in the aging process. As you so well know, tremendous efforts of many scientists are being put forth to find out what these handicaps are and how they can be lessened if not removed. Please consider it within the scope of your total function to tell us a bit about these efforts and prospects. Thus you will help us pass through another night and face tomorrow."

After the Conference, I hope we shall have much more to tell him and to share with the millions of other older persons who are anxiously following the proceedings of this meeting and who are awaiting the long overdue response to their needs and prayers.